



Censorship and Ideology: Eugene O'Neill (The Hairy Ape)

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Censorship and Ideology: Eugene O'Neill (*The Hairy Ape*)

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Eugene O'Neill encountered censorship problems with a number of his plays, most notably *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude* and *The Hairy Ape*. *All God's Chillun* aroused a great deal of controversy because it treated the subject of inter-racial marriage. Before the play opened at the Provincetown Playhouse in 1924, the newspapers announced that a white actress, Mary Blair, would kiss the hand of a black actor, Paul Robeson, during the performance. Right-wing groups including the Ku Klux Klan were irate and threatened members of the production team. The playwright Augustus Thomas, when asked for his comment by the Brooklyn *Eagle*, responded, "In the first place, I should never have written such a play, and in the second place, I should have been willing to do what is usually done in such cases, to permit a white man to play the part of the negro. The present arrangement, I think, has a tendency to break down social barriers which are better left untouched."¹

Another paper, the *American*, ran stories about the play for weeks before it opened. In one they quoted a statement from John Sumner, secretary of the Society of Vice: "From my information the play is at least a tactless thing, and if it does nothing more than lead to race antagonisms the police powers of the city should be used to prevent its presentation. Such a play might easily lead to racial riots or disorder, and if there is any such possibility, police powers can be exercised."² The *American* suggested that an octoroon might be substituted for the white actress, or that the licence commissioner should intervene. When the licence commissioner revealed that the Provincetown Playhouse was outside his jurisdiction because it was a private club, the *American* called for the Mayor to take action. O'Neill responded with a press statement which denied that his play was about the "race problem". "It is primarily a study of the two principal characters and their tragic struggle for happiness. To deduce any general application from "God's Chillun" except in a deep, spiritual sense, is to read a meaning into my play which is not there... Nothing could be farther from my wish than to stir up racial feeling... Finally, and plainly, all we ask is a square deal. A play is written to be experienced through the theatre, and only on its merits in a theatre can a final judgment be passed on it with justice. We demand this hearing. We shall play it before our subscribers only, and abide by their verdict in the fullest confidence that the play, produced as it should be, can give no offense to any rational American of whatever creed or race."³

Although the press printed extracts of his statement, the controversy continued to rage. According to Kenneth Macgowan, "It is no risk at all to say that *All God's Chillun* received more publicity before production than any play in the history of the theatre, possible of the world."⁴ O'Neill later wrote to a friend about the personal attacks that he suffered. "It seemed for a time there as if all the feeble-witted both in and out of the K.K.K. were hurling newspaper bricks in my direction - not to speak of the anonymous letters which ranged from those of infuriated Irish Catholics who threatened to pull my ears off as a disgrace to their religion, to those of equally infuriated Nordic Kluxers who knew that I had Negro blood, or else was a Jewish pervert masquerading under a Christian name in order to do subversive propaganda for the Pope!"⁵

¹ Quoted in Gelb, *O'Neill*, p. 548.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p.550-1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 551.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 551-2.

O'Neill received a threat that he would never see his two sons again if the play went ahead,⁶ and James Light, the director, recalled, "We also got a bomb warning from someone, stating that if we opened the play we would have a theatre full of dead people on our hands. We didn't let any of this interfere with our plans, but there was a lot of tension all around."⁷ Finally the Mayor's office found a technicality by which to stop the play. The first scene required child actors who needed a licence to perform. The mayor's office refused to grant the licence at the last minute. However, the performance went ahead anyway with the first scene being read by the director. By contrast with the dire warnings of trouble on opening night, the performance proceeded smoothly and the result was something of an anti-climax. O'Neill himself had been half expecting a riot, and had stayed sober so that he could join in. He told one of his friends, "If there's going to be a row over one of my plays, I'm too Irish to miss the fun."⁸

Desire Under the Elms, unlike *All God's Chillun*, did not receive adverse pre-production publicity, and it was only after the play had moved to Broadway that it encountered censorship problems. Possibly because of tasteless billboard advertising of the production and because of the title of the play, but also because of its theme of incest and infanticide (since it was based loosely on Euripide's plays *Hippolytus* and *Medea*), the play came to the attention of the District Attorney who ordered it to close. However, the Provincetown Playhouse proposed to fight city hall again. The District Attorney threatened the management with a grand jury hearing, but Kenneth Macgowan countered, "We do not intend to accede to any peremptory demand to take the show off the stage by Wednesday... If we are indicted we will defend the play in the courts. We are gathering many opinions from persons of eminence, who consider this play a fine, strong work."⁹ In the end it was agreed that a play jury should go to see the play and they voted that it should continue to run unaltered. Despite this victory, the play continued to cause controversy. It was banned in Boston and refused a licence in England until 1940. When it went on tour out west in 1925, the entire cast was arrested in Los Angeles and tried in court for performing in an obscene play.¹⁰ A policeman testified in court, "I was painfully shocked... I blushed. I sat there so embarrassed that I feared for the time when the act would end and the lights would again be turned on. After I left that place I couldn't look the world in the face for hours."¹¹ O'Neill felt that, although the free publicity helped box office receipts, the play suffered. "We got a large audience, but of the wrong kind of people... They came for dirt and found it in everything. It ruined the actors because they never knew how a line was going to be taken."¹²

Strange Interlude in 1928 also encountered problems on the road as it touched on such controversial topics as abortion and adultery. Boston again banned it and as it was performed over six hours with a dinner break in the small suburb of Quincy Massachusetts, it helped to put on the map a small restaurant owned by Howard Johnson who then developed a chain of restaurants.¹³ Some people manage to profit from censorship! O'Neill himself was not averse to taking advantage of bad publicity to create interest in his plays. In the case of *All God's Chillun* he suggested taking legal action against the authorities for refusing licences for the child actors, because this was sure to create renewed controversy and free publicity in the press.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 552.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 555.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

¹⁰ Laufe, *The Wicked Stage*, p. 55.

¹¹ Gelb, *op. cit.*, p. 578.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 577.

¹³ Laufe, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Another of O'Neill's plays to suffer from the threat of public censorship in New York and the one I want to examine more closely was *The Hairy Ape*. When it opened in 1922, the play attracted criticism partly because of its language. Alexander Woolcott called the stokers' speech "more squalid than... heard before in an American theatre,"¹⁴ and the New York police filed a complaint asking that the play be closed down because it was "obscene, indecent and impure."¹⁵ Although the language may have been mildly shocking to the audience at the time, more alarming to the establishment was the political ideology of the play.

The Hairy Ape is usually placed in the safe critical category of expressionist theatre. There are a number of expressionistic features, not the least being its structural similarity both to O'Neill's earlier expressionistic play *The Emperor Jones* and to Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, the gross caricatures and the somewhat ludicrous ending. However, it should also be seen as O'Neill's most polemical attack on American capitalist society. The first six scenes of the play are structured like a pre-Brechtian *Lehrstück* anticipating the form of Brecht's *The Mother* by almost a decade. The first two scenes of the play highlight the class divisions on an ocean liner with the first class passengers on the sun deck grossly contrasted with the stockers in the bowels of the ship. When Mildred, the daughter of a multi-millionaire, visits the filthy stoke-hole in the third scene, dressed in white in order to "discover how the other half lives", she destroys the social equilibrium by which the ship has managed to sail. Despite good intentions - "I would like to help them. I would like to be some use in the world" - she faints when she sees the bestial conditions and behaviour of the stokers. Yank, who has previously been at home in the stoke-hole, suddenly feels estranged and tries to understand his position in society. Mildred's aunt had previously signalled the dangers of social work by the rich - "how they must have hated you, by the way, the poor that you made so much poorer in their eyes!" - and so Yank develops an antipathy not just for her but with the aid of his socialist friend, Long, her whole class.

What O'Neill does in these first three scenes is to expose, in Marxist terms, the alienation of man from his labor in the industrial society. Yank in the beginning of the play feels that he belongs in the stoke-hole. He feels at one with his work and his work-mates, but by the end of scene three and the entrance of Mildred into the stoke-hole he no longer feels that he belongs because he now is beginning to see the true relationship between himself and those above him. The alienation of man from his work in the industrial world is underlined by the Irish sailor Paddy in the first scene who expresses surprise that Yank can feel at home in an ocean liner. He looks back to the days of sailing ships, "'Twas them days men belonged to ships, not now. 'Twas them days a ship was part of the sea, and a man was part of a ship, and the sea joined all together and made it one... Is it one wid this you'd be, Yank - black smoke from the funnels smudging the sea, smudging the decks - the bloody engines pounding and throbbing and shaking - wid divil a sight of sun or a breath of clean air - choking our lungs wid coal dust - breaking our backs and hearts in the hell of the stokehole."

Thus, in the first three scenes of the play, O'Neill sets up a very simple metaphor for industrial capitalist society which separates man from the product of his labor and forces him to work in unhealthy and unfulfilling conditions. The do-gooder Mildred is satirized as ineffective because she and her kind will not alter the basic inequalities of the society. In scene four Yank begins to receive an education about the class system. As they wait on Fifth Avenue for the rich to get out of church, Long makes Yank aware of the prices in the jewelry shops, "More'n our 'ole bloody stokehole makes in ten voyages sweatin' in 'ell! And they - 'er and 'er clars - buys 'em for toys to dangel on 'em! One of these 'ere would buy scoff for a starvin' family for a year!" Long becomes alarmed at his success in arousing class hatred

¹⁴ Wainwright, *Staging O'Neill*, p. 111.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

and cautions Yank, “Easy goes, comrade. Keep yer bloomin’ temper. Remember force defeats itself. It ain’t our weapon. We must impress our demands through peaceful means - the votes of the on-marching proletarians of the bloody world!” Yank, however, has been whipped into a fury and rushes at the fifth Avenue gentry looking for a fight, which results in his arrest and imprisonment.

Yank’s revolutionary education progresses in scene six, which takes place in a prison, when a fellow prisoner reads a long newspaper report of a speech condemning the activities of the Industrial Workers of the World. The I.W.W. is misrepresented by a U.S. Senator in the same type of language that gave rise to the Palmer raids against the members of I.W.W. and the growth of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s: “There is a menace existing in this country today which threatens the very vitals of our fair Republic - as foul a menace against the very life-blood of the American Eagle as was the foul conspiracy of Cataline against the eagles of ancient Rome! ... I refer to that devil’s brew of rascals, jailbirds, murderers and cutthroats who libel all honest working men by calling themselves the Industrial Workers of the World... They plot with fire in one hand and dynamite in the other. They stop not before murder to gain their ends, nor at the outraging of defenseless womanhood. They would tear down society, put the lowest scum in the seats of the mighty, turn Almighty God’s revealed plan for the world topsy-turvy, and make of our sweet and lovely civilization a shambles, a desolation where man, God’s masterpiece, would soon degenerate back to the ape!”

By quoting Senator Queen’s speech at length and emphasizing the American government’s over-reaction to the threat posed by the I.W.W., O’Neill deliberately evoked sympathy for the I.W.W. which at the time was being harrassed and its members imprisoned or deported. O’Neill also portrays Yank’s political conversion in a favourable light, despite its crudity. After reading the report himself (“I can’t read much but I kin manage”), Yank discovers, “Sure - her old man - president of de Steel Trust - makes half de steel in de world - steel - where I tought I belonged - to make *her* - and cage me in for her to spit on!... He made dis - dis cage! Steel! *It* don’t belong, dat’s what! Cages, cells, locks, bolts, bars, dat’s what it means! - holdin’ me down, with him at de top!” The childlike quality of his reasoning gives way to a violent reaction to the circumstances in which he now finds himself. Rattling the bars of his cell and ultimately bending them, he threatens revolution, comparing himself to a fire that is so hot it can melt steel and undermine the system. “I’ll be fire - under de heap - fire dat never goes out - hot as hell - breaking out in de night.”

Up to this point, the play could be viewed as socialist propaganda, caricaturing the oppressors and eliciting sympathy for the oppressed, which, unusually, are likewise caricatured. The Fifth Avenue church is included amongst the oppressors for siding with the rich, opposing social change and collecting money for its own unnecessary restoration project. As the overdressed worshippers stream out of church, they march across the stage like “gaudy marionettes, yet with something of the relentless horror of Frankensteins in their detached, mechanical unawareness.” Oblivious of Yank and Long, they speak in “toneless, simpering voices” incriminating themselves and the church for their lack of humanity. “Dear Doctor Caiaphas! He is so sincere! What was the sermon? I dozed off. About the radicals, my dear - and the false doctrines that are being preached. We must organize a hundred per cent American bazaar. And let everyone contribute one one-hundredth per cent of their income tax. What an original idea! We can devote the proceeds to rehabilitating the veil of the temple. But that has been done so many times.” In the first production of the play, the designer used masks for the Fifth Avenue gentry and they appeared, according to the critics of the day, like “masked manikins”, “who walk like automata and prattle.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Wainscott, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-8.

In structure, the play can be seen, until the last two scenes, as a pre-Brechtian *Lehrstück*, similar to Brecht's *The Mother*, in which the simple-minded mother grows from ignorance to political sophistication through a series of confrontations with authority figures. However, in the last two scenes of the play, Yank fails to benefit from the knowledge he has gained and remains alienated from the rest of humanity. In the seventh scene of the play, he visits an I.W.W. office. But rather than finding himself at home with fellow workers, it transpires that he is there because he has believed Senator Queen's speech and he wants to join them because he thinks that they are a terrorist organization. They assume that he is an agent provocateur sent by the government to discredit their organization (as had been happening in the U.S. at the time under the authority of the Attorney General). The I.W.W. secretary claims his organization aims "to change the unequal conditions of society by legitimate direct action" and has him thrown out, rather than trying to convert him to their way of doing things. Yank, on the other hand, dismisses them as a bourgeois trade union organization, trying to improve the living and working conditions of their members, but doing nothing to affect the inner value of their members as human beings. He scoffs, "Tree square a day and cauliflowers in de front yard - ekal rights - a woman and kids - a lousy vote - and I'm fixed for Jesus, huh? Aw, hell! What does dat get yuh? Dis ting's in your inside, but it ain't your belly. Feedin' your face - sinkers and coffee - dat don't touch it. It's way down - at de bottom. Yuh can't grab it, and yuh can't stop it. It moves, and everything moves. It stops and de whole woild stops." This point in the script marks a shift in ideology from Marxist to humanist, from concern with the external class struggle to a preoccupation with the inner value of the individual. Yank asserts that he was better off when he was working under the illusion that he was important to the product of his labor. Now that he recognizes (in Marxist terms) that he is alienated from it, he feels lost. "Steel was me, and I owned de woild. Now I ain't steel, and de woild owns me. Aw, hell! I can't see - it's all dark, get me?"

What he does not say, but what O'Neill seems to imply through Yank's plight is that a radical transformation of society is necessary in order to reintegrate industrial workers. O'Neill seems to identify with Paddy's sentiment expressed at the beginning of the play that the pre-industrial days allowed men to be unified with their work, but that industrialization has alienated man. Rather than offering a solution, O'Neill leaves Yank in a zoo cage of a gorilla with whom Yank hopes to wreak vengeance on the establishment. "I'll take yuh for a walk down fif' Avenoo. We'll knock 'em offen de oith and croak wit de band playin', Come on Brother." The harsh criticism of American capitalism that underlies *The Hairy Ape* is undercut by Yank's pathetic yet ludicrous attempt at befriending the gorilla, his acceptance of the label of "the hairy ape" and the final stage directions after Yank has been killed by the gorilla, "perhaps at last the Hairy Ape belongs."

The ending of the play, although it is in keeping with the style of the rest of the play, seems a bit far-fetched and it is clear that O'Neill at first was not sure how to end it. In the early stage of writing he planned for Yank to return to the stoke-hole of the ship, having been alienated from it but having no other place to go.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is interesting to note that O'Neill had written a short story in 1917 called 'The Hairy Ape' which had been rejected by *Metropolitan* for which his friend John Reed (who later started the American Communist Party) had been writing. Although it is unclear how close the short story was to the play, it is significant that the managing editor in turning down the story, argued, "the ending strikes me as not so good as the rest. To take your man through so much simply human feeling in order to have him join the I.W.W. as the outcome, seems unfinished, or not just the right turn."¹⁸ That O'Neill considered such a political ending for a short story by the same name and that it was rejected

¹⁷ Gelb, *op. cit.*, p. 489.

¹⁸ Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*, p. 389.

by a publisher, may indicate a subtle form of censorship that is perhaps too speculative to be considered here.

Although the final scene of the play tends to soften the harsh criticism of American capitalism that precedes it, the play was in fact a strong indictment. It confronted prevailing social values in a direct and inflammatory manner. Today the play is accepted in western capitalist criticism as important because of its expressionist style rather than for its political ideology, which is again a way of subverting its political message. However, I would argue that it makes a strong political as well as aesthetic statement. Like his later play *The Iceman Cometh*, *The Hairy Ape* reflects O'Neill's life on the docks with anarchists and members of the I.W.W. O'Neill's friend Slim Martin, an I.W.W. supporter, suggested "some of the atmosphere and dialogue" for the play, according to O'Neill's biographers, Arthur and Barbara Gelb, who also suggest that O'Neill may have been prompted to write the play because of the death in Russia of his friend, John Reed.¹⁹ Although its members misunderstand Yank, the I.W.W. is portrayed as a legitimate and responsible trade union organization in an era when it was being outlawed across the U.S., accused of sedition and espionage. Yank's conclusion that something more radical than the I.W.W. is necessary to cure what's ailing him is all the more surprising given the social context in which the play was first performed.

The Hairy Ape was a strong indictment of the American way of life, imbued with Marxist and anarchist ideas, stronger in some ways than the plays of Odets. While *Waiting for Lefty* implies that a strike will solve America's social ills, *The Hairy Ape* suggests that the problem lies much deeper. Arthur Miller in his memoirs remarked on the political impact of *The Iceman Cometh* which he saw in 1946: "I was nevertheless struck by O'Neill's radical hostility to bourgeois civilization, far greater than anything Odets had expressed. Odets's characters were alienated because - when you came down to it - they couldn't get into the system, O'Neill's because they so desperately needed to get out of it, to junk it with all its boastful self-congratulation, its pious pretensions to spiritual values when in fact it produced emptied and visionless men choking with unnameable despair."²⁰

The same comment could be applied to *The Hairy Ape* and O'Neill should be recognized, not just as a story-teller, theatrical innovator and explorer of human psychology but also as a writer who felt the need for a profound transformation of society. Rather than defining O'Neill, as does C.W. Bigsby, as "a playwright whose territory was the mind and its conflicts rather than the social world"²¹, he should be seen as both. The German playwright Gerhard Hauptmann called *The Hairy Ape* "one of the really great social plays of our time."²² And the reaction of some of the critics to the initial production demonstrated its immediate social relevance. Heywood Brown in the *World* claimed that O'Neill had "become a propagandist".²³ J. Rankin Towse of the *Evening Post* assumed that the play was "designed, primarily as a tract in favor of the I.W.W."²⁴ The *Marine Worker*, a trade union journal, recommended the play to its members and R. Robins in *Industrial Solidarity* was grateful for its sympathetic portrait of the I.W.W.²⁵

O'Neill himself felt the play ran "the whole gamut from extreme naturalism to extreme expressionism" as it probed "in the shadows of the soul of man bewildered by the disharmony of his primitive pride and individualism at war with the mechanistic development of

¹⁹ Gelb, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

²⁰ Miller, *Timebends*, p. 228.

²¹ Bigsby, *Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Theatre*, vol. 1.

²² Gelb, *op. cit.*, p. 757.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

²⁵ See Jordan Y. Miller, *Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic*, Archon Books: London, 1962, pp. 359 and 361.

society.”²⁶ In answer to his critics, he explained that while the play was expressionistic, the characters were not mere symbols. Hinting that his work was more effective as a piece of didactic theatre because of its subtlety, he compared it with Gorki’s work. “In special pleading I do not believe. Gorki’s *A Night’s Lodging*, the great proletarian revolutionary play, is really more wonderful propaganda for the submerged than any other play ever written, simply because it contains no propaganda, but simply shows humanity as it is - truth, in terms of human life. As soon as an author slips propaganda into a play everyone feels it and the play becomes simply an argument.”²⁷ In a letter dated shortly after the play opened, O’Neill maintained that *The Hairy Ape* “is also very much a protest against the present.”²⁸ Furthermore, after transferring to Broadway, the play was threatened with censorship by the New York Police Department, as already noted, for being “obscene, indecent and impure.” Perhaps the bad language was simply an excuse to silence the political views expressed in the play. However, because his second Pulitzer prize (for *Anna Christie*) was announced within the same week, it was difficult to sustain the charge and the Chief Magistrate did not take action.

O’Neill, who called the U.S. “the most reactionary country in the world”²⁹ during the crackdown on radicals in the 1920s, wrote other plays critical of American capitalism including *The Great God Brown* (1926) and *Marco Millions*. However, it was *The Hairy Ape* which made the most outspoken comment. At the time it was threatened with censorship on the grounds of indecent language but it was the political content that was the most troubling and which continues to be. And so critics and theatre historians who find it unpalatable today that the father of modern American drama should have held such antipathetic political views prefer to censor his political content by confining his most outspoken play to the domain of expressionism.

²⁶ O’Neill’s letter to Kenneth MacGowan, 24 Dec. 1921, quoted in Gelb, *op. cit.*, p. 490.

²⁷ O’Neill, “O’Neill Talks about his Plays,” in *Eugene O’Neill and his Plays*, ed. by Cargill, et al., Peter Owen: London, 1964, p. 110.

²⁸ O’Neill to Marjorie Griesser, 5 May 1922, in O’Neill, *Selected Letters*, p. 166.

²⁹ Cargill, *op. cit.*, p. 396.